Frequently Asked Questions related to Outdoor Learning Environments:

What the experts say about "Digging in the Dirt"

NC Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance

Child care providers have many questions about what they can, and can't do, on and in their outdoor area. They have concerns that there may be violations or demerits from the licensing consultant, the environmental health specialist or from an environment rating scale assessor if they are having an assessment done for a rated license. In an attempt to dispel some of the concerns that are floating around, listed below are some of the most frequently asked questions about outdoor learning environments. We are all committed to removing barriers to staff taking children outdoors, while still ensuring that the experiences that the children have are healthy, safe and enriching.

As new questions are received they will be added to this list. We hope that you find them helpful as you work to enhance your outdoor area for the children in your care. This resource is in development and is not yet complete, but it does hold valuable information that can be used as it is completed. The questions and issues included in this handout have been given attention from the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project (NCRLAP), the Division of Child Development, and Children's Environmental Health Branch with position statements (in development) from the NC Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance.

NOTE: The agencies and organizations providing the answers to the questions below are specified by the following initials and color codes:

- **NC OLE Alliance – North Carolina Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance**
- **NCRLAP – North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project - responsible for the environment rating scales assessments.**
- **DCD – The Division of Child Development - responsible for child care licensing.**
- **CEHB - Children's Environmental Health Branch - responsible for the health inspection rules and training of environmental health specialists.**

play outside!

NC OLE Alliance Position Statement "Digging in the Dirt":

There is tremendous value in having youngsters experience, work and play with dirt. In stating this, we are not suggesting activities using the dirt that you find at the edge of your parking lot that may contain car oil run-off or animal feces. Rather we are alluding to the rich soil that exists in your school or home garden or in your woods. The friable feeling of dirt, the fragrance of it and the different types of soil youngsters can discover and learn about all contribute to a rich sensory experience for children.

Our state has such a broad variety of soils. We have the clays of the Piedmont, the stony soils of the Mountains, the sandy and peaty soils of the Coastal Plain. Each type of soil allows children to experience an array of textures and encourages them to explore and to make discoveries. Here are some suggested activities to get you started:

- Investigate what kind of soil you have in your play yard – under the trees, by the garden – in the different places that make up your outdoor learning environment.
- Have children bring in a baggie of soil from their own backyard and encourage them to compare them.
- Bring in different types of soil for children to explore; rich mulches, topsoils, silts, sands and clay.
- Make your own soil using leaves, sand and soil from the ground and explore a range of soil recipes.
- Investigate the creatures who live in the soil; earthworms, insects and rolly pollies. Look for pebbles and other natural matter in the soil.
- When it rains allow children to discover how the soil turns into mud and malleable clay.
- Provide opportunities for children to turn that rain soaked soil into mudpies and pots and to sculpt soil when it's wet.
- Use your existing flower beds and raised beds for digging and discovery.
- Shake soil form the school yard in a jar and discover what floats, what remains suspended and what settles to the bottom of the jar.

The possibilities that explorations with soil/dirt provide for learning and sensory experiences for children are endless! So, start digging!

play outside!

1. **Is it really ok to have a dirt pile for the children to dig in on your playground? If so is a cover needed? (One suggestion is to have a large round "swimming pool tub" to put the dirt in, or a type of sand table that can be covered. However, can a dirt area be created that has borders with a cover similar to a sand pit play area?)**

NCRLAP - Yes, dirt is fine as an alternative to sand play. To earn credit, there must be evidence that providing dirt play is intentional; meaning that there is sufficient quantity of the material to dig in, scoop, pour, experiment with and additionally there should be materials or tools provided for children to use such as shovels, etc. Higher levels of quality require more variety in materials and also increased frequency of sensory play experiences. For the ITERS-R a cover is required for outdoor sand (or alternative substance) play. For the ECERS and FDCRS, the cover is not required, but if contamination (such as from animals) was observed this would be scored in the health item. Handwashing would be required when children return indoors after "dirt" play, just as handwashing is required after sand play.	**DCD -** Dirt pile would be acceptable but would need to be maintained.	**CEHB** - Handwashing is required after outdoor activity. Sandboxes are required to allow for proper drainage, covered when not in use and kept clean. Similar recommendations would be made for a "dirt area". In addition, the history and source of the soil would be important information. Where was the dirt obtained? The concern is potential contaminants such as lead or pesticides.

2. **If we do have dirt for children to dig in, what type of dirt should it be….dirt from the earth or should we buy topsoil/dirt from a nursery?**

NCRLAP - There is not a specific type of dirt/soil that is allowable for the rating scales – it is a program choice. If purchasing soil, child care providers should read the label carefully and make sure there are no hazardous chemicals or fertilizers included in the mixture.	**DCD** - We would defer to Environmental Health on this topic.	**CEHB -** Dirt should come from a "clean" source and be free of contaminants such as lead and pesticides.

3. **We use mulch as surfacing for our playground equipment and it tends to deteriorate and become dirt. As our mulch becomes compacted and new mulch needs to be added, but it also makes our fence shorter than 4 ft. high. So we have to remove the old much, before we put in new mulch so that our fence remains the required height of 4 ft. from the surfacing. Evidently, compacted mulch cannot be measured or counted accurately. Who can we get to remove it?**

NCRLAP – Mulch is considered to be protective surfacing as long as it can be differentiated from dirt. In terms of removing older mulch, a CPSI or landscaper would be the person to check with for advice for a specific site. When determining the depth of loose-fill surfacing, assessors use metal probes to dig with. They turn up the surfacing in multiple locations to determine if the surfacing is consistent, if it is the required depth, etc. So, it is not so much an issue of the mulch being compacted that affects the measurements, as it is an issue of the mulch being completed degraded.	**DCD –** One thing that centers need to think about is how close they are placing equipment to a fence which would require them to have mulch all the way to the fence line. By placing equipment farther away from fences, and therefore only needing mulch that stops maybe 2 or 3 feet away from the fence line, a center would never have an issue with a fence being too short. Often a center will just put down mulch on the whole outdoor area, instead of just in the fall/use zone. Providers may also want to think about digging down before adding mulch so that they're actually putting the mulch in to a sunken area. That keeps the mulch contained more easily, and it takes away any issue about the fence no longer rising 4 feet above the ground.	**CEHB -** Professional landscapers should be able to assist with the removal of mulch. Be mindful that tilling rotting mulch may release large volumes of mold spores. Also, sunken areas underneath mulch may hold standing water which promotes insect breeding and, therefore, must be minimized.